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Immersive Entryways into Televisual Worlds

Affective and Aesthetic Functions of Title Sequences in Quality Series

Kathrin Fahlenbrach and Barbara Flueckiger

Abstract: Although some research has been done about narrative functions of title sequences in television series, this article focuses on their affective implications for viewers. Concentrating on immersive styles in trailer sequences of quality series, the article discusses diverse strategies of their affective priming, asking: How do immersive openers prime the viewers' affective appraisal of the show to follow? And how do they prepare them for the leading "feeling tone" (Plantinga 2009: 166) and mood of a series' world? Using the popular openers of the series *Dexter, Six Feet Under,* and *True Blood,* the article analyzes in three in-depth analyses successful immersive strategies for affective priming. They argue that these immersive title sequences use embodied metaphors, and symbols of collective imagery to create ambivalent affective cues that even tend to create mixed feelings in the viewers.

Keywords: affective priming, emotional gratification, immersive trailer sequences

Televisual Spaces: Introductory Remarks

Building immersive audiovisual spaces is one of the most outstanding qualities of film and television productions. In particular, narrative films transport us mentally into fictive worlds that we accept as being true from the moment of their introduction. For a long period of time, the specific characteristic of cinematic attraction has been that films allow us to plunge into narrative worlds, by addressing our senses with moving pictures and sounds. One of the most effective strategies for initiating in us a suspension of disbelief and transporting us into the fictional world is to build audiovisual spaces that we can experience mentally and physically as being true or even real, even if they are highly marked as artificial by their stylized aesthetic features.

Compared to film, television was, for a long time, rather limited in its technological and aesthetic possibilities to transport its viewers into diegetic spaces that absorb them mentally and affectively. Given the small screen and its in-

tegration into the private sphere of the viewers, television is generally characterized by a "doubling of place" (Moores 2004: 21).

Nevertheless, televisual storytelling had immersive effects right from the very beginning. Looking at the first rather primitive soap operas, their success, on the one hand, is indicative of our anthropologically and culturally evolved willingness to project ourselves into the fictional world in order to learn from fictive characters and their stories.[1] On the other hand, television builds fictive spaces that unfold their immersive effects in serial narration over a long period of time. The double-sided televisual space that merges actual everyday space and recurrent narrative spaces also allows the viewers to mentally integrate the characters and their worlds into their non-mediated cognitive and affective reality. It is by their ritualized and habitual reception that their spaces become intensively absorptive. As Mary Laure Ryan summarized it for literature: "The most immersive texts are therefore often the most familiar ones" (2001: 96).

Since the 1990s, this effect has been intensified with the immersive techniques and styles in cinema being adapted for television. High-budget, primetime series such as *Six Feet Under, The Sopranos, Battlestar Galactica, Mad Men,* or *True Blood* differ from low-budget series and soaps in that they have developed sophisticated visual and acoustic styles. While conventional productions still focus on talking heads, ambitious television stations such as HBO address their audiences with elaborate settings and by adapting cinematic styles that are even perceived as "art television" (Thompson 2003). This also concerns spatial designs. On the aesthetics of crime series, Jonathan Bignell states that the "mise-en-scène and the foregrounding of visual style are not only markers of quality in terms of production value, but also perform seeing and knowing as meaning-making activities carried out for and in television" (2007: 166).

Obviously, moving images and sounds are used in quality series today to produce audiovisual evidence, resulting in an immediate and embodied path into the fictional world's reality. Thereby, television not only adapts cinematic strategies to build immersive narrative spaces; it also intensifies their absorptive effects on the viewers while they get to know the serial world over several weeks, months or even years.

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A relevant strategy used to make viewers feel immediately involved in the fictional spaces is to use title sequences as imaginative entryways that confront the viewers excessively with a dense network of affective associations that should cue their emotional appraisal and experience of the episode to follow. As

highly familiar and even ritualized access to the series' world, it seems that their affective priming effect is strongly habituated. By closely analyzing three prominent examples, we discuss the openers' affective and sensorial priming of viewers' perception of the fictional worlds they enter every week during each series.[2]

Title Sequences as Immersive Entryways into Serials' Worlds

Given the highly competitive "flow of broadcasting" (Williams 2003) in television, created by many different stations simultaneously vying for viewers' attention, prime time series have to immediately catch viewers' attention cognitively and affectively. The predominant function of title sequences, therefore, is to transport viewers into imaginative spaces that captivate and guide them into the fictional world of the series' story within seconds, aiming to make them feel present within the series, making them forget their actual surroundings and preparing them cognitively and affectively for the fictional experience to follow. Many theoreticians (e.g., Hartmann 2009; Odin 1980, 2000; Stanitzek and Aplevich 2009) have discussed the title sequence function as a threshold between two worlds—the actual physical world of the viewer and the fictional world(s) of the diegesis, using Gérard Genette's concept of paratext (Genette 1987). Most prominently Roger Odin (1980), in his semio-pragmatic theory, proposed that title sequences should be understood as a framing of the fictional world, which highlights its artificiality. At the same time, they prepare viewers for this artificial reality with a dense composition of affective and hedonic cues which not only make them entertaining but which are also designed to reinforce the suspension of disbelief in viewers' minds.

This thesis is supported by studies in media psychology concerning immersive effects. Based on empirical studies, Lombard and Ditton (1997) distinguish five aspects of presence in media reception:

- presence as social richness,
- presence as realism (above all, experiential realism),
- presence as transportation,
- presence as immersion, and
- presence as a social actor within a medium

Following this distinction, we argue that title sequences primarily intend to initiate presence effects in their viewers based on transportation and immersion. As several psychological studies demonstrate,[3] transportation into a fictional world is based on intensive cognitive and sensorial absorption. Taeyong Kim and Frank Biocca (1997) demonstrate that transportation is often experienced by television viewers in two steps: first, as a departure from the non-mediated environment and second, as the arrival in the mediated envi-

ronment. A primary function of title sequences would be, then, to directly initiate the departure experience. This especially concerns those opening sequences that provide a short and intense recapitulation of the past events of the storyline,[4] highlighting dramatic moments and main characters. Such openers make the viewers remember their cognitive and emotional memories of the series' world, intending to initiate the feeling of coming back to a familiar place.

However, the more sophisticated title sequences seem to aim toward "presence as immersion," providing viewers with the immediate feeling of being there. According to Lombard and Ditton (1997), this effect is based on sensorial and affective absorption and results in our intensive feeling of belonging to the mediated world. As Grodal argues (2009: 182ff.), in narrative films this immersive effect is based primarily on our simulation of characters' emotions and actions within coherent spatio-temporal fictional spaces. In contrast, many television title sequences instead address us by creating imaginative spaces, built on complex associative and affective networks without a coherent narrative structure. Referring to the aesthetics of avant-garde films, music videos and commercials (Flueckiger 2009), their immersive strategy is to intensively activate "synaesthetic affects" as Carl Plantinga (2009) calls them,[5] meaning the affective and sensorial responses and associations that prepare us for the specific world and atmosphere of a series.

This is especially relevant for those portraying ambivalent or fantastic realities. As many studies on high-quality series demonstrate (see, e.g., McCabe and Akass 2007; Mittell 2006), one of their distinguishing characteristics is that they distance themselves from the conventional television code of authenticity and real-life participation. In contrast to the reality-based formats of conventional shows, which claim to be directly relevant to our everyday lives, they instead aim to offer viewers complex, polyvalent, imaginative worlds, playing with ambivalent and often paradoxical realities, including the simultaneity of life and death or of supernatural realities.[6] The opening titles of such series relevantly contribute to the enigmatic ambivalence of their fictional worlds, confronting us with imaginative spaces that intensively portray the atmosphere, moods, and reality cues of the spaces to follow. Hence, we tend to become rather carried away by our senses and associatively, by our imagination. Consequently, the immersive aesthetic of pictures and sound lies at the core of those title sequences aiming to initiate an intensive affective and sensorial flow, priming the affective experience of the fictional world.

Affective Priming and Embodied Meanings in Immersive Title Sequences

A relevant psychological function of immersive openers is their affective priming of the viewers' emotional appraisal of the episode to come. In terms of cognitive psychology a priming stimulus influences duration and meaning in

the interpretation of a subsequent stimulus (Anderson 2000). In affective priming, more specifically, the affective valence of a preceding stimulus (positive or negative) influences the affective appraisal of a following stimulus. Hence the hedonic qualities of an emotional experience are affectively primed as pleasant or unpleasant, good or bad (de Houwer 2009: 315). As several psychological studies demonstrate, "affective priming effects can occur only, if the valence of the prime has been processed. . . . Such findings suggest that the processing of the stimuli valence can occur automatically in the sense of unintentionally, quickly, goal-independently, efficiently, and unconsciously" (de Houwer 2009: 315). Consequently, the affective priming is considered in psychology as a relevant characteristic of automatic evaluative processing (see de Houwer and Hermans 2001).

Concerning immersive title sequences, we argue that they are aesthetically dense networks of affective cues that provide the viewers with dominant hedonic qualities that they are supposed to experience during the show. Their highly sophisticated styles are often densely studded with affective cues that promise us specific emotional gratifications.[7]

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As we demonstrate in our analyses, immersive title sequences often create ambivalent affective cues that even tend to create mixed feelings in the viewers: in their aesthetic design they combine for example, cues of fear and gaiety, lust and disgust.[8] This makes them appealing in terms of a more elaborated affective experience, insinuating in their public deeper affective gratifications. Appreciation in media reception is closely related to eudaimonic gratifications, the "feeling of being moved or being touched, along with more cognitive descriptors such as contemplative, introspective, or meditative" (Oliver and Hartmann 2010: 130). Accordingly, it seems that mixed affective cues in immersive title sequences promise the viewers eudaimonic gratifications (as pleasure and appreciation) when entering the series' world and staying tuned, especially when these are ambivalent or even paradoxical worlds. Because such openers are often highly ambitious in terms of style, a relevant part of their eudaimonic gratifications might be "artifact emotions," which Ed Tan (1996) defines as the emotional and cognitive appraisal of the very artistic quality of a moving image.

Given that immersive title sequences of TV series provide viewers excessively and in a ritualized manner with such densely composed affective priming cues, recipients become used to and maybe even conditioned in their emotional appraisal of a single episode of a series. During the long broadcast period, viewers become highly familiar with them. Consequently, the affective pre-structure of the openers is dynamically expanded and differentiated by the affective associations and experiences of the individual viewers.

Since the opener is the most ritualized element in long-standing series—often being the only unaltered part—its affective rhetoric, strategically aiming to influence the emotional appraisal of the show, tends to become more and more explicit for the viewers. In other words, the initially implicit invitations of the title sequences of how to experience the show become increasingly manifest and concrete because the viewers relate them to their past emotional experiences with the series' world.

Apart from their complex affective structure, immersive title sequences confront the viewers with relevant, even guiding themes and topics of the show: be it such general topics as life and death, or more specific ones such as supernatural beings or sublime forms of human cruelty. Mostly, these general topics encompass collectively shared knowledge and, more specifically, culturally based visual and audiovisual discourses, traditions, and conventions. At the same time, conventional symbols and pictures referring to recurrent topics in media culture have an embodied image that is rooted in our everyday experience.

According to Lakoff's (1987) cognitive metaphor theory, Johnson (1987) and others, humans imagine abstract, complex and invisible phenomena by the use of image schemata as the path schema (from A to B), the container schema (in-out), or the force schema (strong-weak), and of gestalt concepts such as rivers, buildings or exploding bodies (e.g., the concept of time as time flow or happiness as bursting with joy). As Fahlenbrach (e.g., 2007, 2008, 2010) has argued, moving images use the gestalt of embodied image schemata in cognitive metaphors more directly than language. This is especially true for the topographic structure of the pictures. Spatial structures—such as up-down, in-out, foreground-background—that are the basis for our spatial orientation can be related metaphorically to cultural or narrative meanings such as:

- up is good—down is bad
- up is power—down is weak
- friends are in—enemies are out

Audiovisual spaces reflexively activate such basic metaphoric schemata in the viewers' mind, on a low level of perception that remains consciously mostly unnoticed. In addition, filmmakers might also refer to them intuitively or even explicitly and willingly.[9]

Referring to cognitively rooted metaphoric schemata, title sequences use the embodied gestalt of cognitive metaphors in order to make evident complex and guiding topics of a series' world (like life, death, or the supernatural) in a way that viewers understand reflexively by their senses. Hence embodied metaphorical performances are relevant characteristics of title sequences

that act as immersive paratexts (sensu Genette). According to Jonathan Gray (2010), televisual paratexts offer viewers "reading" strategies for the story, priming their understanding. Concerning immersive title sequences, we argue that they structure the cognitive and affective flow of experiencing the narrative world to follow and its emotional appraisal. Thereby immersive title sequences often differ in their affective intensity from the actual show itself in that they artfully condense atmospheres of a show and guide the viewers' affective appraisal of it by presenting collages full of associative and affectively laden images that are not necessarily part of the fictional world itself but prime the viewers' reception of it emotionally. Consequently, it is necessary to analyze their aesthetic structure and discuss probable effects on perception elicited by the patterns and devices observed. Thus we base our analysis on a close interaction between motifs and style.

In the following sections, we analyze the affective priming structure of three title sequences that produce associative networks and aesthetic patterns around two recurrent and mostly related topics: the audiovisual performance of human bodies and of collective imagery. Both topics are used to transport us mentally into metaphorically structured imaginative spaces, full of affective, sensorial and cognitive associations, relating subjective experiences with collective memories. We argue that human bodies and collective imagery are used as embodied metaphorical motifs by designers in order to trigger associative networks in the viewers that prime the affective and aesthetic experience of the shows to follow.

Metaphoric and Immersive Qualities of Title Sequences: Three Examples

Among the most effective strategies to transport viewers affectively and sensorially into the fictional world is the establishing of intimate closeness to human bodies and minds. We thereby enter the fictional world by mentally adapting physical movements and actions that make us experience a physically and affectively based space.

Dexter

The opener of *Dexter* (2006–) establishes extreme physical closeness to the morally ambivalent protagonist during his morning rituals, including several aggressive and subliminally cruel moments; in an extreme close-up and in slow motion, the camera presents us with the protagonist from a microperspective. Similar to the mosquito on his arm that he kills in the first second, we get to know this character from an extremely close bodily perspective. We thereby find ourselves in the paradoxical situation of becoming sensorially intimate with the body of a person that we cannot identify at first. Only after our second viewing of the title sequence can we identify him as Dexter, the main protagonist of the series. By mentally participating at very

close quarters in his shaving, eating, and dressing routine, we enter this story from a predominantly bodily and movement-based perspective. The metaphorical analogies being established within the editing make visually evident the emotionless personality of the paranoid killer Dexter (see Figure 1). The most significant embodied metaphor in this regard is established in the juxtaposition between pictures of the human skin (his neck) and a cutlet, creating metaphorical mappings, such as:

- human flesh is dead flesh, and
- cutting human flesh is cutting dead flesh.

This mapping is made most explicit when he cuts himself with the razor, and a drop of blood slowly leaking along his neck is sponged up with a piece of a white tissue; in the connecting picture he cuts up a cutlet with a big knife. The above-mentioned metaphorical mapping between human flesh and dead flesh is not only realized by the sequence of two similar actions, but also by aesthetically emphasizing the similar textures of the red-blood tissue and of the cutlet in close-up shots.

This metaphorical juxtaposition effectively communicates the psychotic callousness of Dexter in an embodied way, sensorially communicating his cold-blooded and un-affective attitude to the viewer. At the same time, the body-world that we are confronted with here is also highly sensual. This is not only the effect of the extreme closeness to the characters' bodily performances, but also of the visual and acoustic devices used that intensively elabo-

Figure 1. Dexter.

rate the materiality of all objects shown—be they organic or non-organic, living or dead, human or non-human.

Hence we are confronted in the opener with a series of sensorial stimuli typically initiating the negative feeling of disgust: these stimuli include slimy, wet materials such as moist skin, blood, an egg, ketchup, the pulp of a blood orange and a cutlet. These materials are either cut or smudged, evoking a slightly squeamish feeling underscored by the heavily emphasized noises.

Their wetness is stressed by the backlighting, which creates shiny highlights on the objects. Thus the visual and acoustic cues address first and foremost tactile responses associated with these materials. This tactile dimension is most obvious in a racking focus over the surface of a squeezed blood orange, where the very shallow depth of field undermines the legibility of the image. Furthermore, this series of material associations is directly connected to the main title in red on a gray, slightly greenish background. Its function is clearly to foreshadow Dexter's killing with palpable images.

His aggressive attitude is also associated in the composition of the image, which often presents circular shapes, creating an additional series to echo the blood spot. These shapes are, as Catalyn Brylla[10] rightly observes, constantly juxtaposed with straight lines that are tied to actions of "'cutting,' 'stabbing' and 'strangling'"—a composition that is in perfect accordance to Sergei Eisenstein's ([1929] 1998) call for graphic conflict in the montage. Thus, the image composition itself establishes a dialectic relation between organic circular forms and straight lines associated with violence.

The color scheme is focused on red as the color of blood: the first pictures present extreme close-ups of drops of blood produced by the killing of the mosquito and by the razor. As a stimulus for disgust, red is established here as the dominant color in the main title shot already mentioned and continues throughout the titles as a red font. Apart from some shots where we principally see skin or the coffee grinder and pot, almost all shots contain some red elements on either white to gray or greenish backgrounds. The yellow of the egg yolk appears as a contrast to this color scheme, thus enhancing the egg's significance in the context. Most significant, the yolk is stabbed and mixed with the red ketchup. Cutting the egg as an organic entity provides further embodied metaphoric associations, related to the character's aggressive personal traits.

Dexter's title sequence is captured mostly through macro shots. These extreme close-ups not only create a close intimacy to the body of the supposedly unknown main character but also lead to a high fragmentation of the world depicted. This fragmentation effect supports the enigmatic and ambiguous representation of the imaginary world. It thus generates tension between the all too familiar actions of the morning routine and their optical transformation and alienation through the macro lens. Often, it is only gradually that we realize at what we are looking. Beyond the effect of fragmentation and *Ver-*

fremdung, these images with their very shallow depth of field render the depicted objects from a perspective which enhances their wet and slimy properties already mentioned, creating a repelling and uncanny view of them.

But the viewer is not only confronted here with stimuli, guiding to negative affective associations linked with irritation, disgust, and aggression; the opener rather also includes stimuli aiming at positive affects and associations to pleasure. Dexter's aggressively laden performances are presented in aesthetically appealing pictures, contributing to the creation of mixed feelings, associated with the character of the series. By enlarging these pictures to unusual proportions, they stress the underlying violence in these everyday actions. Eric Anderson, the title sequence's director at Digital Kitchen, notes in an interview[11] that it was his goal to expose the undercurrent violence in a mundane situation through the use of macro shots. It has to be noted, however, that the excessive and exaggerated scale also adds to an ironic distancing effect generated by these actions similar to the alienation in Douglas Sirk's melodramas as described by Thomas Elsaesser (1972).

While all these formal and aesthetic devices create a tight web of associations, the music in fact creates ambivalent feelings in the viewer by mashing associations of disgust with pleasure. It works against the somber undertone in the visuals and the noises with its light, steady, seducing rhythm. In addition to the percussion, guitars, and mandolin enhance the mainly rhythmically organized theme that contains only short motifs of a melodic development on top of an underlying tapestry of strings. It evokes a warm southern feeling with a slight Hispanic touch. This choice contradicts Anderson's first temp track from Bernard Hermann's famous score for *Psycho*.[12] With Dexter, it is not only the exaggerated and gross display of everyday bodily actions that gives the title sequence a playful and ironic undertone. When we compare the different versions—the working print with the temp track and the final cut—we immediately understand that this kind of ambivalent reading is especially suggested by the music.

The trailer sequence of *Dexter* confronts the viewers with contradictory affective stimuli that prepare them for the ambiguous feelings that they will typically experience throughout the series. It primes them affectively for the moral conflict between their sympathy for the protagonist as a smart and friendly young man and their rejection of him as a cold-blooded killer. The moral ambiguity of Dexter is presented in appealing collages of pictures and music. The stylized representation and enhancement of the mundane provokes at the same time appreciation for the artful aesthetics and codes of *Verfremdung* (Flueckiger 2009). Furthermore it promises a compelling show to follow, related with "artifact emotions" (Tan 1996), pleasure and appreciation by offering stimulating experiences of mixed emotions.

Six Feet Under

A second example for an immersive trailer sequence that primes its viewers affectively for positive gratifications related to ambivalent feelings is the opener of *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005; Figure 2). It also combines positive and negative affective stimuli by presenting the embodied anticipation of a symbolically laden imaginative space, transporting us into a world of ambivalent realities, shifting between life and death. As Joan Bleicher (2010) argued, this opener is structured by the use of traditional symbols of death in Western collective imagery: gazing up into the sky, two hands crossed then separating in slow motion, a tunnel with a light at the end (as associated with near-death experiences), a flower fading in time lapse and a raven sitting on a grave. According to Lakoff (1987) and Johnson (1987), such conventional symbols are rooted metaphorically in most Western minds. By referring to cognitive metaphors of separation, decay and death in moving pictures, the mise-en-scène provides this symbolic imaginary space with embodied gestalts: the movement of the camera and the recording speeds (as source domains) communicate separation, a distancing from life, and entering the infinitive space of death. These processes, related to the abstract domain of death are shown to us as concrete movements of bodies and objects in space: the hands separating in slow motion, a raven flying into the sky, the movement of the stretcher, transporting a corpse through a hallway, and so on. Furthermore, the camera perspectives vividly represent the metaphoric gestalts of the symbolic images: a long-distance view makes us anticipate the perspective of the corpse on its way to the morgue and to the cemetery. This subjective perspective of a dead body announces the ambivalent reality of the series' world to the viewers, showing dead people in dialogue with living people. In line with the movements of separation and transportation, the sequence presents the last stations of a life to us as a means of transport to different places. Underlying the whole mise-en-scène is a key metaphoric concept that death is a journey. This metaphoric gestalt allows the viewer to imagine and experience the rather unseizable phenomenon of death in an embodied way, performed in vivid movements by the camera.

The metaphoric concept of death is established throughout the whole narrative and aesthetics of the opener. It creates a small story by connecting the objects and the corpse to their environment by the use of deep focus. This construction of depth is matched by symmetric image compositions and/or straight lines leading to the vantage point of the central perspective. Only rarely does a shallow depth of field single out a specific object such as the raven, the flowers decaying in time-lapse photography, an extreme close-up of an eye or the hands lying clasped on the body. It is no coincidence that these images are highly charged symbolically, based on embodied metaphors

Figure 2. Six Feet Under.

of death: the last journey of the corpse being made evident by producing deep spaces through which it has to pass.

The materials are much less present here than in *Dexter*. Instead the images are marked by a clean appearance, aiming at provoking positive affective associations. Similarly to *Dexter*'s opener, the sophisticated audiovisual design contrasts positively charged depictions with negatively connoted topics of death and decay that are related to anxiety and fear. Even the infusion of formaldehyde and the washing of the body are rendered light and pleasant. Hence audiovisual style relevantly contributes here to create an ambivalent feeling tone of the opener, promising the viewers eudaimonic gratifications, connected to a non-stereotypic and ambitious narrative about death: the appreciation and pleasure of learning not to fear death but also to deal positively with it is highlighted throughout the series. Given that accepting death as part of our lives not only concerns every human but is also a recurrent topic in philosophy, arts, and culture, its compelling narrative treatment in a TV series might provoke in viewers eudaimonic feelings of appreciation and artifact emotions.

The lighting scheme greatly supports this effect. In many images we are presented with a strong overblown backlight which—especially through the movements toward the light source—bathes the entire scene in light rays, thus drawing on romantic depictions of spirituality and transcendence as in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich or William Turner. Thus once again, the pictures are designed to trigger familiar associations in the minds of Western viewers, built on collective imagery. Undoubtedly, this image scheme builds a connection to the symbolic dimension of heaven, which is emphasized in images of the sky that cover approximately a third of the entire sequence. Furthermore, the overblown highlights provide a bright contrast to the bleak subject.

While *Dexter*'s image composition and montage highlights contrast in an Eisensteinian sense, this title sequence draws much more on continuity,

matched by the slow editing pace. Accentuating continuity, the sequence creators use continuous movements to provide viewers with a sensorial experience of its metaphoric meaning—death is a journey.

The continuous development of the sequence is underscored by slow camera movements and some soft image transformations caused by time manipulation such as speed ramp or time-lapse photography and discreet rack-focus. Soft transitions between shots, fade-ins and fade-outs enhance the smoothness of the image flow.

In a similar fashion, the continuity—indicating positively connoted feelings of harmony—is also supported by the harmonious color scheme based on desaturated colors in the blue-green area with some brown tones stemming from skin or from wood. However, there are stark contrasts in the pictures, caused by the backlighting in conjunction with steep gradation. In connection with the desaturated colors, this harsh contrast recalls a historical look associated with nostalgia. On a further, more symbolical level, the blacks and whites in the images echo the theme of light versus darkness often tied to the opposition between life and death.

As in *Dexter*'s title sequence, many images fragment their objects or strip them of any personal touch. This holds especially true for the depiction of the human body, which is fragmented into parts: an eye, hands, feet. Therefore, the corpse is represented as an allegorical image of a dead body devoid of the particular traits of an individual.

Thomas Newman's title music relies mainly on a rhythmic pattern generated by single chords and pizzicato elements in combination with percussions. After 28 seconds the tune begins, played by an electronic valve instrument similar in sound to an oboe. Pizzicato in film music is usually associated with comic moments, but the singing sound of the oboe has an uplifting quality that seduces viewers to sing along. Therefore—as in *Dexter*—the music evokes positive feelings in opposition to the seemingly dark subject of death.

Related to the leading metaphor of death as a journey, the opener builds an immersive entry-space to prepare the viewers for the ambivalent reality of the story and its mysterious atmosphere. It thereby addresses our vital fears concerning the end of life with the usage of both collective symbols of and embodied metaphors for death. At the same time, the whole mise-en-scène presents this last journey in rather harmonious pictures, appealing to positive feelings which contrast fears related to death. As a paratext of the series it prepares viewers affectively for a fictional world in which death is part of life and might even be negated.

True Blood

The title sequence of *True Blood* (2008–) metaphorically merges subjective and body-based spaces with pictures of collective imagery (Figure 3). It also

prepares the viewers for the "feeling tone" (Plantinga 2009: 166), the atmosphere, and the ambivalent reality of the story's world: a reality of hybrid beings, including men, vampires, shape shifters and demi-gods who transcend the limits between human and animal, dead and alive, good and evil. The co-creative director of the opening sequence, Shawn Fedorchuk, characterizes the priming function of the sequence as follows: "We wanted to convey a feeling of bloodlust, together with a vivid hyperreality. Stitching together these contradictory, yet strikingly similar worlds of sex, death, and transcendence was a major influence."[13] Obviously the aim of the producers was to evoke in their viewers mixed feelings by mashing positive affects of pleasure and lust with negative affects of disgust, fear, and aggression. To prime viewers' minds for the ambiguous and affectively laden narrative spaces of the show, the sequence establishes a jumbled atmosphere of decay, religious and sexual tension and religious transcendence, with the creators using a metaphoric collage of historic and live-action footage material. They use collective imagery of the American Deep South—pictures of houses and streets in Louisiana; of Baptist preachers and people praying and taking part in ecstatically religious rituals; of policemen clubbing black citizens on the streets and historic pictures of the Ku Klux Klan. All these pictures, which activate rather negative collective memories and stereotypical images of Southern racism and radical Protestantism in the 1960s, are closely related and have been intercut in the editing with pictures of erotic performances, including dances, stripping, and sex. Vividly indicating human life, sexuality is contrasted here with both religion and death. In a triangular metaphorical setting, pictures of

Figure 3. True Blood

sexual performances are inter-cut not only with religious displays, but also with pictures of wasting organic bodies (the decomposing corpse of a fox in time lapse) and death (the corpse of a wounded rat). In each case, human and animal bodies are the very motifs of the pictures that offer a sensory gestalt for metaphorically blending the abstract domains of life–death–religion. Key metaphorical mappings realized in the fast editing of the pictures are:

- Life is sexual performance
- Life is an ecstatic body
- Death is a wasting body
- Religion is an ecstatic body

As a result of the triangular interrelation between the three dominant metaphorical targets, hybrid blending spaces are established in the editing, such as:

- A sexual body is a dead body (pictures of a woman stripping naked combined with a picture of a dead rat)
- A sexual body is a religious body (pictures of erotic dance combined with pictures of religious performances)
- A religious body is a sexual body (pictures of religious actions combined with pictures of erotic dance)

As a result, the editing addresses biologically rooted affects and emotional dispositions in the viewers (like the fear of death, disgust, lust, and the need for existential reassurance) that should make them experience the openers' hybrid imaginary space physically and affectively. The embodied metaphoric gestalt of motifs and mise-en-scène effectively serves to transport the viewers into the ambivalent affective atmosphere of the story. On this basis, synaesthetic affects are produced by the editing and stylistic devices that densely activate complex and ambiguous networks of associations, both based on collective imagery, including the retro-styles of analogue photography, and on embodied experiences.

Similar to the openers analyzed before, this one also primes positive artifact emotions in their viewers by artistic codes associated to its use of historical and nostalgic styles. The shaky, noisy, grainy, gritty images display a fake found footage style to address a sense of historicity. They expose their materiality either with the line raster typical for low-resolution video footage or with the look of grainy film stock worn-out with scratches and spots. Flueckiger (2004, 2008: 334–356) has discussed such emulation of analog artifacts in digital images in depth, elaborating several reasons for their application, some of which apply to this title sequence as well. Emulating a film look pri-

marily serves to evoke a historical period or a flashback by reproducing earlier technical or aesthetic standards or traces of use like scratches and dirt, even to the point where we see only the material while the images' content has been lost. These non-representational images resonate in the works of avant-garde filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage and expose the material basis of the film stock. They enhance the stylization for artistic reasons, to deepen the expressiveness of the sequence, and to comment on the filmmaking process in a self-reflexive manner. Last but not least, the artifacts support the effect of authenticity by emulating low resolution footage or blurred and shaky images as an amateur witness would produce when casually capturing a scene. All these strategies are present here and give even the most repulsive images an appealing look simply by layering a retro style on top of them.[14] Its appealing quality can best be grasped with art historian Alois Riegl's (1903) notion of age value (*Alterswert*) to describe a subjective sensation, nostalgia, when we enjoy looking at an historical work of art with its typical symptoms of decay.

The self-reflexive mode expressed by the retro-style is further supported by the sheer heterogeneity of the images and the frenzy of the fast editing pace, with roughly 100 shots present in this sequence, some of which are barely longer than one frame. Often the images are juxtaposed by jump cuts. These stylistic features elicit a permanent state of excitement. In contrast to *Six Feet Under*'s title sequence with its slow and continuous development, this sequence is based mainly on rhythm. Referring to the metaphorical mappings mentioned before, rhythm is obviously the most relevant embodied image schema, used as a source domain to make the viewers experience life, death, and religion as abstract target domains. However, the rhythm is only in part matched by the quite sedate country meter of the title song "I Wanna Do Bad Things with You" by Jace Everett. Most prominently, there are some dense and very short cuts, which are in sync with cascades played by the electric guitar or syncopic breaks from the drums. Apart from these obvious rhythmic structures, however, the images' rhythm often seems to contradict the rhythm of the music, thus highlighting the stark sensorial dimension of the visuals.

The color scheme separates several strands of motifs from each other. The dominant colors are green and red and some blue, with hues in a striking contrast to the primary colors. Thus green is either shifted to yellow or to blue, while blue and some red alike are darkened or marked by a very grainy and noisy texture. The darkening and the texture support the nostalgic impression caused by the analog artifacts. Some images are desaturated or black and white and evoke an even more historic look. Given that most images are tinted in one dominant hue, the contrasts between images over the cuts are highly stressed and amplify the fast editing pace. The red strand is associated with the main title, which is handmade on a crumbled paper support. It connects the blood association evoked by the title with some nightclub shots in the no-

torious red lighting, as well as some extreme close-ups of a boy eating red berries with the red juice smudged all around his mouth, foreshadowing the vampire bites. Only the bodies in the quite explicit sex scenes are very white in front of a black background. These explicit images are cut so quickly that one hardly sees anything. Only in freeze-frame does one notice their outspoken representation.

As a result, this opener also produces highly ambivalent hedonic cues that promise the viewers a dense and compelling experience of the narrative world. While confronting its viewers with a dense collage to produce an intense and embodied experience of mixed feelings, it prepares them for the ambivalent affects that they might experience during the show, combining pleasure, lust, disgust, and fear. Furthermore this title sequence also promises eudaimonic gratifications related with the feeling of appreciation and artifact emotions by entering a show that deals with vital fears and desires in a compelling and stimulating way.

Conclusion

As our detailed analyses suggest, the title sequences of successful high budget primetime series are densely composed affective entryways into the atmospheres of a narrative world. Their dominant function is to transport viewers affectively and mentally into the fictional spaces to follow by associatively addressing embodied experiences, affects, and visual knowledge, in part based on collective imagery. As Roger Odin (1980, 2000) points out in his semio-pragmatic model of reception, title sequences establish a specific effect he calls the "effet générique" (2000: 76). Its function, according to Odin, is to mark a film as a constructed fictional space by highlighting the ostentatious presence of the enunciator usually characteristic for arthouse films. Thus the analyzed title sequences use aesthetic codes like *Verfremdung* in order to indicate an artistic enunciator and to provoke artifact emotions as an eudaimonic gratification in their viewers.

As the three case studies have shown, one strategy to achieve this effect is their obvious stylization in the foreground. In addition to pointing to the artificiality of the fictional world, the high aesthetic density provides an immediate sensorial immersion. This immersive strategy, however, is paralleled by the strategic and ostentatious self-reflexive mode of presentation. This might cause a distancing effect toward the fictional reality in viewers' minds; however, in the popular titles sequences presented here, it contributes to enhance the emotional and cognitive appreciation of the show, related to its artful composition. This is most prominent in *Dexter*'s exposition of his familiar morning routine through a very unfamiliar perspective provided by the macro shots, and even in the presentation of the images' materiality and heterogeneity in *True Blood,* we are confronted at least partially with a style that

seems to contradict the immersive effect. Finally, it helps to strengthen both the affective priming and eudaimonic gratification of the show, linked with appreciation, art emotions, and the stimulating experience of mixed feelings.

Deborah Allison (2001) elaborates in her analysis of the history of title sequences that the *self-reflexive foregrounding* was introduced very early in the 1910s and thus far ahead of the mythically charged revolution commonly attributed to Saul Bass's work. Although the modernist approach expressed in Bass's and also Maurice Binder's creations relies on the deliberate reduction of the audio-visual stimuli to convey the essence of the films they announce, the title sequences of the quality TV series discussed in this article surely apply a very different strategy by overwhelming the viewers with a wealth of stimuli.

Only in *Six Feet Under* do we find a "cool" and reduced stream of images. The images themselves provide a clean appearance in combination with deep focus and symmetrical image compositions. The dominant mode, however, connects highly compressed arrays of stimuli with a self-reflexive presentation. This contradictory arrangement probably reflects the transitory function of the title sequence to provide a passage between the two worlds mentioned.

In a similar fashion we are confronted with tension in the semantic register. Some images or montage configurations supply metaphorically and symbolically charged imagery, even to the point where they refer to stereotyped depictions. Yet we perceive highly fragmented or obscured images, which sometimes lack every reference. Thus the images oscillate between over- and under-determinate forms of representation. Seldom, however, do they depict individuals, the exception being Dexter, whose face we see only at the end of the sequence in its entireness. To put it differently, these images represent general types of a class rather than specific tokens. As a result, a strong cognitive activity is evoked in the viewers who try to decipher the obscured meaning. Often also the orientation in these imaginary and strangely transformed pictorial worlds is suppressed. Certainly this arrangement is intended to trigger attention and curiosity.

On a further note, we have argued that the structural arrangement is an end in itself. It has been shown that rhythm and movements are prominently used as embodied image schemata to create imaginative entry-spaces that metaphorically gestalt ambivalent realities, based on life, death, and religion. By repetition and the arrangement of similarities and differences, these short forms create abstract patterns to address immediate bodily responses, often enhanced by the interaction between visual and acoustic elements as discussed in the case studies. In addition, however, these arrangements also develop multiple threads operated in parallel. These series of similar compositional or stylistic features such as shapes, tex-

. . . rhythm and movements are prominently used as embodied image schemata to create imaginative entry-spaces that metaphorically gestalt ambivalent realities, based on life, death, and religion.

tures, light, colors, and materials make up a web of associative connections. By relating the repetitive pattern to the aboutness of the film, a connection emerges between the sensorial and the conceptual domains.

In fact, this insight not only matches their function as an entryway into the narrative, but also their ritual function in the context of television series. The repetitive exposition to the same title sequence for months and even years fills us with excitement and joy in expectation of the episode to come.

In contrast to narrative films and the diegetic spaces of the series, their immersive effect relies not on our intensive adaption and simulation of a character's emotions and actions but instead they catch their audience directly by their senses, their affects, and cognitively rooted images and metaphors. As a result we might immediately feel present in this world, experiencing its reality and atmosphere from the first second of the show.

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Notes

[1] See Torben Grodal (2009: 98): "The mental capacities that enabled us to envisage supernatural and fantastic experiences evolved because they enhanced our chances of survival, because imagination, the ability to visualise alternative future scenarios, is vital to the intelligent and flexible management of behaviour."

[2] First results of this study have been presented by Fahlenbrach at the 2011 Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image conference.

[3] See Richard Gerrig's 1993 psychological study on transportation in reading.

[4] See the standardized announcement in the beginning of the title sequence of *Battlestar Galactica:* "Previously, on Battlestar Galactica . . ."

[5] Although we prefer the psychologically valid term cross-modal associations for the mostly unconscious connection of different sensorial stimuli, we follow Plantinga's concept of "synaesthetic affects" to describe the affective functioning of immersive trailer sequences. Plantinga (2009: 166) argues that "the spectator cannot be said to share the same emotion as the characters, but nonetheless experiences powerful elements of the affective experience, in such a way that the spectator could be said to have an approximation of those emotions, which is affectively similar (in 'feeling tone' or physiological manifestation) and congruent (that is, sharing the same general orientation, to the narrative situation)."

[6] Prominent examples of ambivalent fictional realities are those in *Six Feet Under* or in *True Blood*.

[7] We are grateful to Anne Bartsch for suggesting to us that title sequences promise emotional and more concretely eudaimonic gratifications to viewers. Both concepts of gratifications have been elaborated in Oliver and Bartsch (2010) and in Oliver and Hartmann (2010).

[8] This is the case, for example, in the title sequences of all three series discussed in this article.

[9] In his handbook, sound designer Tomlinson Holeman (2002) advises students of sound design in film and television to explicitly make use of metaphoric images that are anchored in our minds.

[10] Catalyn Brylla: "Why Do We Love Dexter Morgan in the Morning?" http://cdn4.artofthetitle.com/assets/WhydoweloveDexterMorganintheMorningbyCatalinBrylla.pdf (accessed 31 March 2012).

[11] A full transcript of the interview is available at http://www.artofthetitle.com/2010/09/27/dexter/ (accessed 31 March 2012).

[12] The same combination of sinister visuals with cheerful, uplifting music applies to our next case study on *Six Feet Under.*

[13] See http://truebloodnet.com/true-blood-filming-opening-sequence-designer-moves/ (accessed 31 March 2012).

[14] This retro style has been fashionable for many years now, and especially at present there is a boom with widespread applications such as Hipstamatic that convert ordinary pictures taken with a smart phone into this style.

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